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New Brunswick in the Critical
Period of the Revolution.



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Book N5W2

New Brunswick in the Critical Period of the Revolution

By

Truckee
John H. Wall

Reprinted from the Minutes of the New Brunswick Historical Club, Meeting of
February 27, 1908.

THE TIMES PUBLISHING COMPANY
1908

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“New Brunswick in the Critical Period of the Revolution.”

After the fall of Fort Washington the American army commenced its retreat across New Jersey, from Newark to Elizabeth and from there on to Brunswick where Washington expected to make a stand, circumstances were such that he found it impossible to do so, and he retreated to Trenton.

Under date of December 1, 1776, Washington wrote to Governor Livingston saying: "That the enemy's advance parties were seen last night at Bonum, that they were impressing wagons and horses, and collecting cattle and sheep, which he took to mean that they were preparing to march a considerable distance

At 7.30 p. m., the same date, he wrote to the President of Congress, that the enemy appeared in several parties on the heights opposite Brunswick, and were advancing in a large body towards the crossing place. A smart cannonade took place while Washington's troops were on parade, but with little loss on either side.

Washington's army at this time, including about one thousand men under General Williamson, who, by the way, Washington did not have a high opinion of as he stated in his letter that he did not think Williamson had the confidence of the people, and for that reason the militia from the counties of Morris and Sussex turned out slowly and reluctantly.

General Greene writes from Trenton to Governor Cook, "when we left Brunswick we had not three thousand men—A very pitiful army to trust the liberties of America upon. We are endeavoring to collect a sufficient force to give the enemy battle, or at least to stop their progress."

We have had another proof of the folly of short enlistments. The time for the five months men expired at this critical period. Two brigades left us at Brunswick, notwithstanding the enemy were within two hours march and coming on. The loss of these troops at this time reduced his

excellency to the necessity to order another retreat. Here we are endeavoring to draw our forces together. The Philadelphia and Pennsylvania militia turns out with great spirit, but the Jersey militia behaves scurvily, and I fear are not deserving of the freedom we are contending for."

Things were very dark on the side of the patriots, and looking at them as they appeared at that time; one can appreciate the feelings of Washington when he wrote to his brother, "I am wearied almost to death with the retrograde motion of things, and I solemnly protest that a pecuniary reward of twenty thousand pounds a year would not induce me to undergo what I do; and after all, perhaps, lose my character, as it is impossible, under such a variety of distressing circumstances to conduct matters agreeably to public expectation, or even the expectations of those who employ me, as they will not make proper allowance for the difficulties their own errors have occasioned."

What Washington thought was the most pronounced cause of these errors, is plainly stated in the following letter to the President of Congress, dated at Trenton, December 5th, 1776.

"Sorry am I to observe that the frequent calls upon the militia of this State, the want of exertion in the principal gentlemen of the country, or a fatal supineness and insensibility of danger, till it is too late to prevent an evil that was not only foreseen, but foretold, have been the cause of our late disgraces.

"If the militia of this state had stepped forth in season—and timely notice they had—we might have prevented the enemy's crossing the Hackensack, although without some previous notice of the time and place it was impossible to have done this at the North River.

"We might with equal probability of success have made a stand at Brunswick, on the Raritan, but as both of these riv-

ers were fordable in a variety of places, (knee deep only,) it required many men to defend the passes; and those we had not.

"At Hackensack our force was insufficient, because a part was at Elizabethtown, Amboy and Brunswick, guarding a coast which I thought most exposed to danger; and at Brunswick, because I was most disappointed in my expectation of militia, and because on the day of the enemy's approach—and probably the cause of it—the term of the Jersey and Maryland brigades expired; neither of which would consent to stay an hour longer.

"These among ten thousand other instances might be adduced to show the disadvantage of short enlistments, and the little dependence upon militia in times of real danger. But as yesterday cannot be recalled, I will not dwell upon a subject which has no doubt given much uneasiness to Congress, as well as extreme pain and anxiety to myself. My first wish is, that Congress may be convinced of the impropriety of levying upon the militia, and of the necessity of raising a larger standing army than what they have voted."

Washington in his letter makes the statement that Congress should not have anything to do with the militia unless in cases of extraordinary exigency, but instead should have an army of forty thousand men, well officered, who would be daily improving instead of continuing a destructive, expensive and disorderly mob.

Samuel Cleaveland, brigadier general of royal artillery, makes the following return or ordnance and stores taken by his Majesty's troops from the 12th of October to the 20th of November, 1776.

At Fort Washington and batteries depending; Iorn ordnance, four 32 pounders, two 18 do., seven 12 do., 5 9 do., 15 6 do. 8 do., and two five -and-half-inch brass howitzers.

Fort Independence: Iorn ordnance: 12 four pounders.

Fort Valentine: Iorn ordnance: 4 twelve pounders, 10 nine do. 10 six do. 37 four do.

Fort Lee; Batteries in the Jerseys and surroundings: Iorn ordnance: 5 thirty-two pounders, 3 twenty-four do. 2 six do. 2 three do., one thirteen-inch and one ten inch brass mortar. Two thirteen inch, one ten and one eight inch Iorn mortar. thirteen inch, 1 10-inch and one eight-inch, Iorn mortars.

On the road leading to Hackensack, two twenty-four, two eighteen, and four twelve pound cannon, mounted on travelling carriages, also four six pounders, unmounted.

Total—Iorn ordnance: 9 thirty-two, 5 twenty-four, 4 eighteen, 15 twelve, 15 nine, 31 six, 49 four, and 10 three pounders, 2 five-and-half-inch brass howitzers, one 13 inch brass mortar and 1 10-inch; also thirteen-inch, and one eight-inch, Iorn mortars.

Shot: Round, loose: 1087 thirty-two pounders, 272 eighteen pounders, 2637 12 pounders, 300 six pounders, 700 four pounders, 870 three pounders.

Case; 30 thirty-two pounders, 40 eighteen pounders, 340 twelve pounders, 290 nine pounders, 74 six pounders, 39 three pounders, 1159 double-headed of sorts, and 42 boxes for grape.

Shells: 176 thirteen-inch, 511 ten-inch, 1140 eight-inch, 1170 five-and-half-inch, 1200 four-two-fifths-inch.

Powder, barrels	15
Muskets,	2800
Musket Cartridges	400000
Iorn, Tons	25
Intrenching tools of sorts	500
Armours' tools, sets	6
Hand-barrows,	200
Gin, Complete,	1
Sling-Carts	2

Also a large quantity of other stores that the American troops were very much in need of at that critical period.

How confident the British were of crushing out the last hope of American liberty, is shown by the following extract of a letter received in London from a field officer in the King's army, dated New York, December 2, 1776. Just the day the British entered New Brunswick.

"The troops under General Lord Cornwallis, after driving the rebels from Fort Lee, or Fort Constitution, in New Jersey, proceeded from Hackensack to Newark, and from Newark to Elizabethtown, where they found great quantities of stores, among which are twenty tons of musket bullets.

"The rebels continued flying before our army. Lord Cornwallis took the fort opposite Brunswick, plunged into the Raritan river, and seized the town. Mr. Washington had orders from the Congress to rally and defend that post, but he sent word that he could not.

"He was seen retreating with two bri-

gades to Trenton, where they talk of resisting; but such a panic has seized the rebels, that no part of the Jerseys will hold them, and I doubt whether Philadelphia itself will stop them.

"The Congress have lost their authority, they ordered all the militia of Pennsylvania to be drawn out, they refused to march.

"Their second order was for two companies of every regiment to be imbodied and repaired to Washington, but they refused to do so.

The Congress consists now of only seven members at Philadelphia, and they are in such concentration that they know not what to do."

The horrid warfare the Tories of New Jersey countenanced in which they participated was disgusting. Governor Livingston in his speech to the Assembly, in 1777, said "That the Royalists plundered friends and foes; effects, capable of division were divided; such as were not they destroyed. They warred upon decrepit old age, warred upon defenceless youth, committed hostilities against the professors of literature, and the ministers of religion, against public records and private monuments, books of improvement and papers of curiosity, and against the arts and sciences. They butchered the wounded, asking for quarter, mangled the dead, weltering in their blood, refused the dead the right of sepulchre and suffered prisoners to perish for want of subsistence."

Deeds far worse than these, deeds of savage brutality, were the works, partially or wholly, of the Americans who adhered to the royal cause. Not only did the Royalists plunder his neighbor. But we find Mr. Hampton, one of the Continental quartermasters, complaining that the militia of Essex were plundering in Middlesex. It would surprise and shock some of the citizens of Middlesex were they aware of the fact, that many of the most prominent inhabitants of the county were under the watchful eyes of John Dennis and his associates, least they should stray from the fold. How close a watch this committee kept, and how well they discharged the duties imposed upon them is a matter of history. They had several hundred under constant, but secret guard. They made charges against John Hortwick, and the same were taken under consideration by the committee of safety, who reported that "John Hortwick

has always been esteemed a good citizen and a hearty friend of this country; that he is a military associator, and as such has turned out on all occasions when required"

Mr. Hortwick was charged with getting supplies and sending them to the captain of the ship "Asia." The evidence proved that he and his sons were prisoners, and that he traded with the captain to fulfil an oath that had been exacted from him to regain their liberty of himself and his sons. The committee recommended that he be forgiven, received into favor, and restored to good opinion of his countrymen. John Brown and Jacob Neffies, persons employed by Mr. Hortwick, were also charged with disloyalty, they were tried and acquitted.

William Halfpenny was a New Brunswick huckster who took the protection of the King. He was an old man that sold vegetables to the armies, and was charged with giving information to the British. He was arrested with Peter Overt, Francis Letts and a Mr. Lake by Major John Taylor on special orders of General Putman. Halfpenny's case was considered of such importance that Washington made a report of it to the Continental Congress, an abstract of which is printed in the minutes of that body. James Wells and Richard Churchward, of Paritan Landing acknowledged that they were in New York with the enemy, but said that they were obliged to do so when the British troops left Brunswick. They were discharged on taking the oath of abjuration and allegiance.

Jonathan Clawson, of Piscataway, was brought before the board and on being examined said that he was threatened and frightened by the provincials to such a degree that he fled into Brunswick for safety, but was taken up by Colonel Dun, Cornelius Clawson was brought before the board in a like manner. It being found that both were voluntary within the enemies lines for a considerable time. They were given the choice of enlisting in the American navy or going to jail. They went to jail.

A man giving his name as John Brown was captured by a party of horsemen near the enemies' lines at New Brunswick. He proved to be John Lee, of Philadelphia. He confessed to Major John Taylor that he had introduced a number of recruits into New Brunswick for the purpose of

joining the British army. One of the most rabid Loyalists that went over to the King was George Rapalje. He voluntarily took the oath of allegiance at New Brunswick.

The committee of safety appointed Thompson Stelle a commissioner for the county of Middlesex. For seizing and disposing of the goods and effects of persons who had gone over to the enemy, he was taken prisoner, and William Manning was on June 27, 1777 appointed to take his place, this was a rather diplomatic, as well as an unsatisfactory position, but those were times when the spirit of patriotism led men to do their duty, and those men did it well.

When the Revolution broke out and it became necessary for institutions as well as individuals to cast their lot, Queens College, despite its name and origin, joined the patriot cause, as the records of her professors and students in that memorable struggle well prove, and, more or less as a result, we find the sessions suspended, particularly while the British held New Brunswick. The trustees had the college removed to the north branch of the Raritan away from the regular route of the army. The State enacted a law by which students at college were exempted from military duty. This law did not have much effect on the patriotism of the students of old Queens for we find their tutor, Colonel Taylor drilling them, and later they are found giving a good account of themselves on various battlefields.

One of those who deserves special mention is James Schureman one of the class of 1771-1775, who took part in the battle of Long Island, helped raise the first company that went out from New Brunswick, held a commission as captain, in the early part of the war was taken prisoner and confined in the notorious old sugar house, New York, from whence he made his escape. After the war he was elected to Congress, where he served as a member of the committee that took the first census of the United States. He served a full term in the United States Senate, and was later returned to Congress. During the war of 1812 he was Major of New Brunswick. He died January 22 1824.

Among the associates of Schureman was Captain Guest, who intercepted Colonel Simcoe, of the Queens Rangers, in his famous raid through Jersey. Among the pursuers of Simcoe was Captain Peter

Voorhees, who in his zeal, got in advance of his men and was assaulted by the enemy. In jumping his horse over a fence at the intersection of George's Road and Town lane he fell, and the Rangers coming up beat him unmercifully with their swords. He was brought into the city and died in a few hours. This was undoubtedly one of the most brutal murders that took place in this neighborhood during the war. Simcoe was taken prisoner and the rage of the inhabitants was so great that the town was searched for him to have revenge on his person. He was concealed in the old "Washington Headquarters" at the corner of Neilson and Albany streets, from whence he was taken to Burlington where he was exchanged.

Captain Huyler was one of the most vigorous of New Brunswick's farriers. He was a special mark for the British. The annoyance he gave them was so great that an expedition of three hundred men, in several boats, fitted out to proceed to Brunswick and destroy his whaleboats. The plan was carried into effect January 7, 1782. The river was clear of ice, and, proceeding cautiously up the Raritan, they had nearly reached the town, when, at midnight, Mr. Peter Wyckoff was awakened by the barking of a watchdog, and at once concluded that an attack was to be made upon the city. Mounting a horse, he gave the alarm to Captain Guest, and spread the word from house to house, warning the inhabitants of danger. A scene of great excitement ensued. Lights flashed through the town, and in a short space of time all the able-bodied men were under arms. But the enemy had reached the whaleboats and set them on fire, Huyler's men came up, and, driving them off, prevented them from accomplishing their purpose. They now found that their only safety was in a hasty retreat. The night was dark and a running fight took place in the streets. The British endeavored to reach their boats by passing down Queen street (now Neilson) to their rendezvous at the foot of Town Lane. But they were intercepted at the Dutch church, from behind the walls of which a volley was fired as they pressed on eager only to escape. The principal skirmish took place at Mr. Agnew's but they succeeded in reaching the river and made their way back to Staten Island. The enemy's loss in this encounter was four killed and several wounded. On the side of the Ameri-

cans there was the loss of six persons wounded, none proving fatal, and five or six prisoners. A ball was shot through the body of John Nafey in this skirmish, but the prompt attention of Colonel Taylor saved his life.

When the enemy entered New Brunswick fortifications were thrown up on the hill beyond the Theological Seminary, and two important outposts were erected, one at Raritan Landing, on an eminence overlooking the river, the other on Bennett's Island, two miles below the city. Many of the officers were quartered upon the inhabitants and on the property of William Van Deursen, below New street, there was an encampment with a redoubt thrown up for their protection.

Many of the citizens were compelled to abandon their residences, all business was suspended, public worship broken up, and the whole town under the control of the enemy. The British army immediately appropriated to their own use all the public buildings of the city. The pews were taken out of the Dutch Reformed church, on Neilson street, and it was converted first into a hospital, and afterward into a stable. The Presbyterian church was burned.

Hessians and Tories were let loose under orders from General Howe directing that:

"All salted and meal provisions which may be judged to exceed the quantity necessary for the subsistence of an ordinary family shall be considered a magazine of the enemy and seized for the King, and given to the troops as a saving for the public."

Under such orders the pickling barrels and granaries of every Jersey farmer became a lawful prize, the captor in each case being the judge of the quantity necessary to be left for the subsistence of each family.

The farmers throughout this whole section of country were compelled to deliver over their stores into the hands of the British. At Three Mile Run the buildings were plundered, and frequently, fired. Barns were torn down to supply timber for the construction of a temporary bridge over the Raritan and some of the most wanton cruelties were inflicted.

But they were not allowed to remain in the undisturbed possession of the town. Colonels Neilson and Taylor gave them constant trouble; Captain Guest was on the watch for a favorable opportunity to

pounce upon the Hessians; James Schureman, who had learned something of war at the battle of Long Island, gave them no rest, while Captain Hyler, whose adventures with his whaleboats around Staten Island seemed almost romantic, and who could fight on land as well as on water, kept them in constant apprehension. These officers watched every movement of the enemy, drove back their foraging parties into the city, and often skirmished with their outposts. Deeds of personal valor were of frequent occurrence, and traditions are preserved in the families of the town of heroism unsurpassed in the whole history of the conflict. Colonel Neilson organized a secret expedition against the outpost of the British on Bennett's Island, near Weston's Mills. With a picked command, numbering two hundred men, he stealthily approached the works on the morning of February 18, some time before day break. It was a clear, cold night and a fresh fall of snow rendered the undertaking extremely hazardous. But they reached the works without being discovered, and Colonel Neilson was the first man to leap the stockade. Captain Farmer saved the life of his commander at this moment by aiming a well-directed blow at the sentinel, who was in the act of discharging his musket into his breast. The short engagement lasted only a few minutes, when the works were surrendered by Major Stockton, who was the Acting Commander of the post in the absence of Colonel Skinner. One Captain, several subordinate officers and fifty-five privates were taken prisoners, and a quantity of munitions of war were captured. The British knew nothing of this event, as only a few guns were fired, until some time during the morning, when the Americans, with their prisoners and booty, were far on their way toward Princeton, where General Putman was stationed, into whose hands they delivered their spoils. Colonel Neilson and his men received from General Washington a very high compliment for the wisdom with which he had planned and the secrecy with which he had executed this most successful expedition.

When Howe held New Brunswick Washington was kept well informed of what was going on in the city. Abram Slight reported 8000 at or near New Brunswick, more between that and Elizabethtown, to the number of 20,000, and that General

Howe had arrived and would give the rebels sixty days to make their submission. He also said that he had seen two field pieces on the George's Road. Christian Hutman reported Brunswick as full of British troops. William Hunt saw every house full of Red Coats. Nicholas Hopper made the same statement.

Bettie Miller, wife of Jeremiah Miller, of Colonel Mile's second batalion, said, that the British were in Brunswick, the Hessians on the other side of the Raritan and that their numbers were said by some to be six, and by others ten thousand; and that their cannon were part at the barracks and part on the other side of the bridge, all of which was very discouraging to Washington and his officers in their hour before dawn. Reports were continually made by the friends of Washington's little band. Although New Brunswick sheltered many a Tory, it must be said of the citizens in general that through the whole course of the war they proved themselves firm and distinguished Whigs, and inflexibly persevered in their attachment to the American cause in its most perilous and gloomy days.

The sprit and the pluck of the men of those days is well illustrated in the story that is told of William Lyons, a member of the Middlesex militia. On the march after the affair at Princeton, Washington noticed Lyons, as particularly large blotches of blood were left on the frozen snow behind him. The general seeking his condition, was moved to compasion and remarked to him "My brave boy you deserve a better fate." "It's all right, sir," said Lyons, "There is no danger of my

feet freezing so long as the blood runs. I am perfectly satisfied, and thankful to know that I have tried to kill one Red Coat and hope to get the chance to do so again before long."

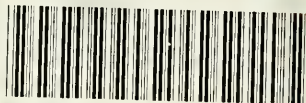
While other cities of the State were arguing whether or not they should join the Patriot cause and cut the ties that bound them to the mother country the south ward of New Brunswick took vigorous action and on June 19, 1776 sent a petition to the Council of Safety "praying that a new government be established, and that a speedy and absolute independence upon Great Britain be proclaimed

The mighty stream of Revolutionary events rolled on to its end. The battles of Trenton, Princeton and Monmouth have taken their place in the history of the greatest revolution of modern times. The events which took place in and about New Brunswick contributed in no small degree to the independence of the United States.

Had Washington failed in New Jersey, and in the vicinity of New Brunswick in particular, there would never have been a surrender at Yorktown. It was here within a radius of thirty miles of Rutgers College that American independence was won. It should not be forgotten that the losses to New Jersey in proportion to her population and wealth, were greater probably, than to any other member of the Confederacy. It was within her borders that Washington encountered his greatest distresses and difficulties. It was here that the patriots fought, half starved, and almost naked, that the sun of freedom should shine for their posterity.



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